

Georges Perec's Geographies

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‘Force yourself to see more flatly’: A photographic investigation of the infra-ordinary

Joanne Lee

In *Species of Spaces* Georges Perec suggests various ‘Practical exercises’ as a means to explore the street. The instructions propose attention to what would be most obvious, common and therefore usually of no interest, with investigators told to go about things ‘more slowly, almost stupidly’.¹ In order to reveal and understand the infra-ordinary, in ‘Approaches to What?’ Perec makes clear that the purpose of such activity is to wrest ‘common things [...] from the dross in which they remain mired’, and to give them a tongue, to ‘speak of what is, of what we are’.² As an artist-scholar researching everyday places through an essayistic approach involving photography, I am drawn to Perec’s specific injunction: ‘Force yourself to see more flatly’.³ This reflects for me the medium’s ultimate translation of dimensional space into picture plane, through what photographic theorist David Company has described as a ‘heightened interest in the surfaces of the world’.⁴

In what follows I take literally Perec’s suggestion to see more flatly and I investigate, via the constraint of black and white image-making, the material surfaces encountered daily along the 12-minute walk from my Sheffield home to the tram stop from which I commute to my university job. That Perec makes clear his interest in ‘A town: stone, concrete, asphalt’,⁵ and recognises the ‘invisible underground proliferation of conduits’, or the ‘underneath’ of limestone, marl, chalk, gypsum, sand and lignite,⁶ encourages me to consider what lies exactly around and

underfoot, and that could pass unremarked on so many daily journeys. I attempt to follow, through a practice of artistic research, certain of Perec's instructions from which this essaying of the surface of a place (given that, properly speaking, an essay is a trial, test or experiment) is excerpted to a sequence of paired images for the current context. This visual essay is followed by short passages from Perec, which prompt observational writing of my own, an inventory of sorts, developed through the aggregation of intentionally flat description; the images are intended to be read in critical and generative dialogue with the text. I conclude with a reflection upon this sort of Perecquian practice as a method of artistic research, and some remarks on what a determinedly superficial attention can reveal about the infra-ordinariness of place.

In so doing, it considers how Perec's strategies for defamiliarising the places he explores are anticipated by Russian Formalist writers and photographers, whose conception of *ostranenie* sought to make the everyday strange, to heighten attention and thus to push aside habitual and complacent responses. Whether through the use of literary devices, unusual language or particular ways of looking, their method intended creative and critical effects that pre-figure Perec's own practices, and continue to inform my own (see [Figure 15.1](#)).



Figure 15.1 Following Georges Perec's call to 'decipher a bit of the town', Joanne Lee used her camera to observe and document a route she walks every day: the unremarkable space between her home in Loxley, Sheffield, and the terminus in Malin Bridge, where she catches a tram on her daily commute. A sequence of her photographs is shown here, in a photographic essay entitled 'The Loxley Road Sequence'; continues overleaf. © Joanne Lee

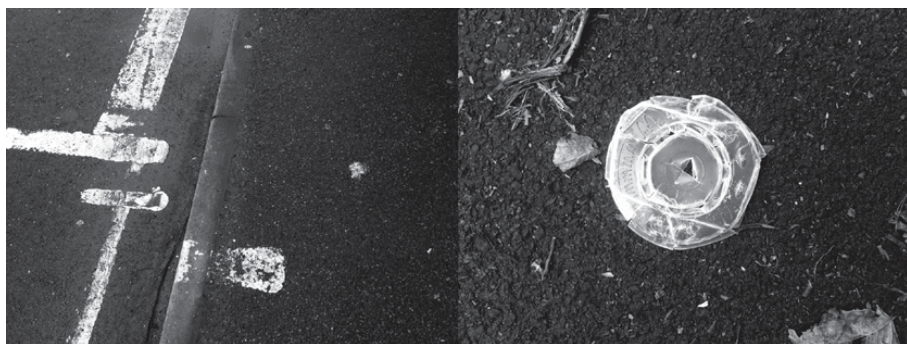




Figure 15.1 Continued

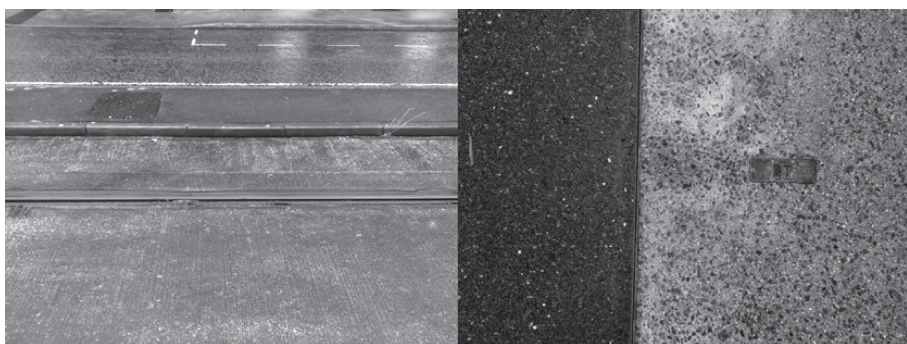


Figure 15.1 Continued

'You must set about it more slowly, almost stupidly. Force yourself to write down what is most obvious, most common, most colourless.'⁷

The roadway is a different material to the pavements, coarser. It has long white lines down the centre of the carriageway, hatched markings and directional arrows at junctions, and a segment of reddish orange separates traffic at the pedestrian refuge.

The tarmac pavement runs underfoot from my home almost the whole way along Loxley Road, bar the gravelly ingress of a lane leading down to a garage premises where domestic vehicles and taxis are repaired: there, the road surface is a patchwork of asphalt and gritty mud which holds pools of water long after the rest of the area has dried. The tarmac is far from consistent, its texture and hue change, from the darkest shade – almost black – through a patchwork of paler greys, as various interventions have been made for the installation or mending of utilities and telecoms. Some of the inspection hatches themselves bear a carapace of tarmac, though it is a poor mimic of its surroundings. After heavy rain, the botched repair to a drainage leak continues to ooze water through a seam of blacker, tarry matter.

Roundels of discarded gum pock the surface; the longer they have been there the more intricate is the craquelure of age.

Along two substantial stretches where it abuts stone walls, and behind which there are ash and poplar trees, it accrues a scurf of leaf litter and twigs brought down by the wind, which grows muddy in wet weather and gets tangled with rubbish. Woodpigeons select a particular tree in which to roost, and their guano spatters the pavement below in greenish-grey and white.

Cast yellowish concrete bears a texture of raised nipples to indicate designated crossing points for pedestrians.

'A town: stone, concrete, asphalt.'⁸

The houses here include a few stone cottages dating from the mid-nineteenth century but most are twentieth-century dwellings. The oldest are a dark gritstone; some still bear the blackened rime of Sheffield's industrial pollution, though many have been sandblasted to restore their original appearance. Newer houses have been infilled in different decades and vary between a blond sandstone and red or cream brick. Some, my own included, are pebble or spar-dashed: in this climate, the once silvery surface has become stained and grubby, so a few home-owners

have decided to overpaint with a fresher grey or golden yellow. There are boundary walls of old stone, elegant mid-century metal fences, hedges of conifer and beech, and bright reddish-orange contemporary larchlap panels. Two houses built at the same time have chosen entirely different window treatments, twins determining to be as distinct from one another as possible. One stone cottage must once have been restored but is now falling back into disrepair: grass flourishes in its unmaintained gutters, and the roof is entirely moss covered; an algae-coated caravan lurks in the shade of unmanaged woodland to the rear. At night, only dim lights are visible through deep red curtains that are never opened. It has such a traditional symmetrical façade that it is just the sort of house drawn by young children but, with its gloomy outlook, it's more like the location for a horror movie. Approaching it the temperature seems to drop, the street around recedes and the tangle of surrounding woods encroach.

'What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms.'⁹

The bus stop glass is incised with an intricate web of *sgraffiti*; the work is, by the look of the handwriting, that of the schoolchildren who regularly wait or hang out at this stop for buses home after school. One panel has had rougher treatment, the result of being abraded by someone seeking to clean off more traditional sprayed graffiti, and is now murky, almost opaque.

The nearby Academy school is the reason for a tidal passage of young people through this neighbourhood morning and afternoon. The Supper Spot does a roaring trade as the school day finishes, with clusters of kids scoffing hot chips from styrene trays, while the nearby minimarket has to employ extra people to stand at the door admitting only a few children at a time in order to combat shoplifting.

There's a tricky junction at which cars and kids are involved in a sort of twice daily choreographic negotiation with one another, each trying to dodge the other.

'Make an effort to exhaust the subject, even if that seems grotesque, or pointless, or stupid. You still haven't looked at anything, you've merely picked out what you long ago picked out.'¹⁰

It's almost impossible to exhaust the litter. Every day there are new deposits. The main culprits for this seem to be the patrons of local fast-food

outlets. Very often it's from McDonalds: white opaque plastic discs, the lids from their soft drinks, are always distinct against the dark tarmac, while the brown paper bags with their yellow and red branding linger for a while before turning to pulpy mush in the rain. There are orangey-yellow styrofoam containers that contained the burgers or kebabs bought from smaller caterers, and the white trays smeared with leftovers from the nearby fish and chip shop, which sometimes come paired with the chip forks in blue plastic. The most numerous items are bottles for squash, juice and fizzy pop which come in clear plastic, opaque purple, orange and green, and there are many cans of energy drinks with their vivid graphics. While some appear on the pavement, many have been dropped over the adjacent wall and litter the margin of the woods that line the valley bottom.

Lager and cider cans proliferate too. The cans mark the route home from a night out, or the wanderings of the teenagers unable to drink legally who stock up with booze and head down into the woods to party. The strong smell of weed, and flashes of silver on the pavement (containers of nitrous oxide), indicate that alcohol is not the only drug.

Also common are the flaccid black bags of dog shit, slipped casually over the wall by owners who have decided to rid themselves illicitly of their pet's leavings; occasionally these catch on the spiny bushes and hang for a while before slumping into the leaf litter. In other places the bags hang more assertively from branches, decorating the woods with a collection of abject baubles.

The fly tipping of building materials and waste from DIY projects occurs where it is less overlooked by houses, particularly over the wall next to the care home: here dumps of household rubbish appear periodically too, including old duvets rolled up and cinched with parcel tape, stuffed tightly into black bags. This is macro-scale waste, but kneeling on the ground and looking closely, there are fragments and particles of much tinier stuff: scraps of paper and card, pieces of plastic, shards of glass and metal.

'Read what's written in the street: [...] posters, traffic signs, graffiti, discarded hand outs, shop signs.'¹¹

There is so much to read. A road sign reminds motorists (with little effect it seems) that the speed limit here is 30 miles per hour. Pages ripped from a young person's exam revision diary are scattered for many metres, either the joyful result of the examination period ending, or the actions of a bully? Childish graffiti is spray-painted on the

pavement. A small flyer for a local handyman pleads for attention and the text asks politely that it is not binned but passed on to those who might need his services. The monthly farmers' market further up the valley is advertised with distinctive yellow signs cable-tied to lamp-posts. New management is announced at the fish and chip shop, as well as its capacity to take card payments; quite often though, it's not open when it should be and apologies for the inconvenience are posted in the window via scribbled handwritten notes indicating an unexpected appointment or a family crisis. An informational board on the exterior wall of a pub tells of the major flood in 1864 when a dam burst at the head of the valley and inundated much of the area, leaving six dead in the wrecked establishment's cellar.

The faded paint of an advertisement for Condor Flake tobacco endures amid the more contemporary signage for the current Nail and Beauty Lounge that plies its trade on the corner above the hairdressers. A series of early twentieth-century hoardings made in concrete and surrounded with moulded frames are now crumbling, grown over with ivy they are mute ghosts of a previous era of advertising. Across the road, graffiti on the metal shutters of a long-closed shop front proclaim 'FED UP' in large capitals.

There are messages of strength and persistence that seemingly come from a time with different values: one manhole cover carries the name 'Valiant', another 'Savage', and yet another 'Dreadnought'; this last is positioned opposite a section of terraced housing with a stone plaque inscribed 'Perseverance Terrace'. Rather unaccountably, one inspection cover for a cable television installation is titled 'DANELAW'.

'Or again: strive to picture yourself, with the greatest possible precision, beneath the streets, the tangle of sewers, the lines of the Métro, the invisible underground proliferation of conduits (electricity, gas, telephone lines, water mains, express letter tubes), without which no life would be possible on the surface.'¹²

There is so much to see at the surface that tells of what is, or what will be sent underground. Triangular flaps marked CATV punctuate the street, and reveal where cable television has been installed. Square covers with the sign YW Water, or sometimes simply a W, conceal the meters for Yorkshire Water: they are inserted higgledy-piggledy in the pavement, the hinge facing in different directions.

The larger utility inspection hatches and their varied titles and logos tell a history of public and private services: there's the old Sheffield Corporation, and the different incarnations of GPO (General Post Office), Post Office Telephones and BT (British Telecom).

Most of the terraced houses have coal holes in the pavement adjacent to their front elevation; this is where, before the installation of mains gas, the fuel for domestic heating would be delivered into the cellar. They are now sealed shut with rusted metal plates and grilles; some are screwed or bolted, others tied with ad hoc lengths of wire.

When it's quiet, especially in the evening, one can hear the sewers beneath rushing with water; when it's very quiet, one can also hear the river flowing in the valley below. There have been problems with surface drainage here: water spreads in sheets across the road, bringing a tide of dirt, sticks and other debris, which remain along the gutters for a long while, sometimes blocking them and causing still further problems.

Blue boxes and black bins linger on the street outside the prescribed times for the collection of recyclables and waste: since a number of the houses have steps down to the road that are both steep and narrow it must be challenging to drag them back and forth each week.

'What's beautiful and what's ugly in a town? How do you get to know a town? How do you get to know your town?'¹³

One length of stone wall is topped with a crusty black coping, so-called 'crozzle', the repurposing of a material once used to line steel cementation furnaces. It's not uncommon in the city and its presence delineates distinctively that one is here rather than elsewhere; that said, no doubt many current residents barely notice it. It isn't exactly beautiful: even after all these years it is burnt-looking, and so rough and sharp as to deter people from clambering over (as was the original intention), but weathered a little and set against mossy stone walls, it takes on a craggy rightness here, almost a black sort of tufa. Noticing and knowing about the crozzle signifies long-term residence, or a mark of inclusion for those who have sought to know the city's industrial past. This is one form of knowing, but the many activities that go on today about which the older, long-resident generation understand little or nothing suggest that none of us quite know the same town as one another.

'Decipher a bit of the town.'¹⁴

In 'Species of Spaces' Perec twice instructs us to do so.

1. In trying to decipher a bit of the town, even a single area can be unfathomably complex, its different users seeing and enjoying the same place in very diverse ways. For example, the lanes leading off the main road here are variously places for the more able-bodied residents from the local care home to get some air, for teenage drinking and drug-taking, for parents strolling with their kids, for dog exercising, gay cruising, and off-road motorcycling. Some users and activities remain separate by virtue of the day or time – dog walking mainly takes place before and after work, and the off-roading seems to be largely at a weekend – but others must occupy the same space at the same time, whether or not they are aware of one another.

2. A pierced steel panel is affixed to a crumbling brick wall: it carries the graffitied words *Tranquil* and *Euphoric*, which appear in a rounded script produced by a silver marker pen, as well as three, maybe four, other tags, one of which has been buffed and overwritten. There is also a sticker printed rather unaccountably with the name of the Polish city *Nowa Huta*. (It too was a place of significant steel manufacture like Sheffield, though of much younger vintage having been built in the mid-twentieth century as a model communist city to accompany the huge New Foundry from which it took its name.) For whom are these messages designed? Why are they here? What is their intended meaning? What can be inferred?

'To cover the world, to cross it in every direction, will only ever be to know a few square centimetres of it, a few acres, tiny incursions into disembodied vestiges, small incidental excitements, improbable quests congealed in a mawkish haze a few details of which will remain in our memory.'¹⁵

In the small traffic-blighted front garden of a mid-century semi-detached house stand a variety of hand-built bird tables and nesting boxes. It gives the impression of a small village for birds, and their similar-but-different styles and colours offer a sort of miniature mirror to the wider neighbourhood. Several laminated notices inform passers-by that they are for sale, giving prices and the repeated instruction to ring the doorbell if wanting to make a purchase. There's a mobile number to call too, also given repeatedly, in case the occupants are out. It's a modest spectacle, and friends who pass this way for the first time often take a photograph; maybe it is what they will remember most from their visit.

'[I]n spite of yourself, you're only noting the untoward, the peculiar, the wretched exceptions; the opposite is what you should be doing.'¹⁶

A particular telegraph pole repeatedly catches the eye as it has an enduring pale blue-ish waxy splatter on its lower reaches that evokes drunken vomit or an alien sort of gunk: despite close inspection the material constitution of this stuff remains uncertain. Was it vandalism or the product of some sort of maintenance? For many months, the post opposite carried the tattered remnants of a bouquet placed at the site of a cyclist's tragic death in collision with a car. The road surface was sprayed too with fluorescent orange dots, markers delineating evidence as police investigators sought to understand what took place; while an arrest was initially made, no charges were ever brought. Sadly such occurrences remain far from 'wretched exceptions'; what remains horrific and exceptional for the cyclist's family and friends is merely another number in the statistics of daily life and death on the city's roads.

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Almost every working day I walk the same route from my home in Loxley, Sheffield to the Malin Bridge tram terminus from which I commute into the city. I've lived here for approaching three years, though the area wasn't entirely unknown to me when I was resident in the city 15 years earlier. In some ways Loxley is unremarkable: it is an ordinary suburb on the north-western flank of Sheffield, neither especially poor nor particularly rich, a predominantly working-class district. In others, it is rather distinctive. It is, for example, one of the valleys where the Industrial Revolution can be said to have begun, with the construction of many water-wheels driving the workshops in which Sheffield's early blade industry was established; a good deal of industrial archeology endures here, as well as many small enterprises that continue to make and mend. It was also the site of a major disaster when the dam of Dale Dike Reservoir failed catastrophically and the resulting flood laid waste to the valley and the city downstream. Since the city repeatedly frays here along footpaths into woodland, pasture and eventually the moors of the Peak District, it immediately calls into question Perec's demand to establish 'what is the town and what isn't the town'.¹⁷ It has such an unusual mix of the urban/rural and the domestic/industrial that it never quite seems as other places.

My assertion of Loxley's special qualities is of course entirely to miss the Perecquian point. When Perec exhorts 'Carry on / Until the scene

becomes improbable / Until you have the impression, for the briefest of moments, that you are in a strange town, or better still, until you no longer understand what is happening, until the whole place becomes strange, and you no longer even know that this is what is called a town, a street, buildings, pavement',¹⁸ he didn't have in mind the distinctive historical claims, or other sorts of categorisation I made above, which might figure a place to be unusual. These are much too grand, or are the ready-made terms, the sort of thing town planners and sociologists will already have said: precisely the stuff he tells us to forget. Rather, his instruction to make strange is to enable us to really see the everyday places and habits to which we pay too little attention, to reveal that with which we have become too familiar.

Perec asks: 'How are we to speak of these "common things", how to track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.'¹⁹ For him the answer was in a sort of writing that could be described as defamiliarisation through the practice of listing. His listing is generative, excessive, a piling up of connected and disparate details. Witness the 'Index of some of the words used in this work'.²⁰ And take as an exemplar the paragraph about moving into and renovating a new home, where he gathers a host of verbs (without punctuation) to describe the activities involved in so doing: 'cleaning checking trying out changing fitting signing waiting imagining inventing investing deciding bending folding stooping sheathing fitting out stripping bare splitting turning returning' and so on for another 38 lines.²¹ Perhaps 'Species of Spaces' can be considered fundamentally a project of list-making?

Perec asks in 'Approaches to What?', 'How should we take account of, question, describe, what happens every day and recurs every day' and the method in his practice seems to be by noting, by responding to observational rules and by pursuing suggested exercises.²² Listing is directly offered as a means of investigation: in the section headed 'The Town', he says, 'make an inventory of what you can see. List what you're sure of.'²³ While it is excessive, it is also knowingly partial. Perec's method for attending to a city street begins with: 'Observe the street, from time to time, with some concern for system perhaps. Apply yourself. Take your time.'²⁴ I note particularly the phrase 'with some concern for system perhaps', which introduces a permissive inconsistency to the investigative approach right at the start. Whatever his love of constraint and generative rules, the projects he pursued not infrequently failed to adhere to them, or to be completed in quite the way intended at the outset.²⁵ This is the messy territory of practice, rather than the more formal project

design of academic research that is set out and carried through, with minor scope for fundamental change once under way.

When Perec writes about looking and noting ‘until the whole place becomes strange’ he is clearly using a process of defamiliarisation. The idea was particularly powerful in the theory and practice of those Russian Formalists whose neologism *ostranenie* suggests the dual actions of making strange and of pushing aside. Viktor Shklovsky describes it thus: ‘The technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar,” to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.’²⁶ For the Formalists, the intention was to create a sort of literariness or poetry that would prevent habitual sorts of judgement and instead induce a heightened state of attention where different responses might be possible. When photographers of the time pursued defamiliarisation, as in the work of Aleksandr Rodchenko, the effect occurs through unexpected camera angles, the use of shadow, and the focus on small parts or details, as well as the repetition of particular formal motifs explored through series. It’s an approach that reappeared much later in the century in photographic practices such as those of Lewis Baltz, who photographed banal American industrial buildings, suburban housing developments and wasteland. Here, while there are no odd angles – most of the photographs are shot head on – the type of architectural structures he repeatedly pictured in series such as the *Prototype Works* (1967–76) are defamiliarised to the point that they become abstract, minimal forms and material surfaces. But emptied out as they are, and isolated from the wider townscape in which they are located, they sustain a sort of interest that would rarely have been provoked by the buildings themselves. As we contemplate the pictures, these buildings seemingly become something more fully as images, the result of a wholly photographic way of seeing that mobilises the formal qualities of focal length, framing, tone and texture in order to translate the world two-dimensionally.

Both practices have been instructive for my own photographic investigations, which are a species of visual listing and note-making. But in getting to know a place through photography I often get much physically closer to the surfaces of things in which I’m interested than these predecessors, in some cases almost having my nose pressed up right against my subject matter. Dwelling on interior or exterior surfaces – attending to the forms, textures and tones of ordinary floors, pavements, roads, walls and ceilings – I hover close with the camera so that when I’m finding where I am at, I am simultaneously getting lost from the bigger picture. Even when I step back, there is rarely a horizon line by which to tell quite

where the things photographed might actually be situated. Just as Perec begins 'Species of Spaces' with the modest page and various domestic locations before expanding out into the wider world, my early spatial investigations began at home, with photographs of found scraps of paper on my desk, and of the looming shadow cast by a nondescript lampshade on the ceiling above the bed. I stared repeatedly through a camera lens at condensation dribbling down windows or the speckled patches of light reflecting off windows onto roads and other buildings and considered that with this sort of looking it seemed as if I was photographing what was barely 'photographable' at all.

Once the photographs are taken, they are usually set aside for a while, which distances me further from the time they were shot, and the specific ideas I had at that point; I want to see them afresh, the images as they are, rather than as I had intended them to be. The distinct activities of photography and reflection on the photographs enable me to see again, and see differently, the subjects I had been looking at. A further act of defamiliarisation is in the practice of creating sequences: sometimes it is a series of single images, but often I pair pictures, or produce triptychs to set within the sequence. The sequences may draw together pictures made at different times or across a long duration, bringing them into unexpected conversations with one another, shaped by formal or conceptual aspects.

This same approach has been applied to the making of the images essayed and excerpted for the current article. The photographs deal intentionally with the most common things to be encountered: manhole covers and hatches for coal; litter; mud; graffiti; the linear forms of tram tracks; pipes and conduits; white lines and arrows marking the road; tarmac, concrete, bricks and masonry; fencing, plastic bins and metal shutters. I photographed repeatedly, on multiple days, walking to work, as the changing light and different types of weather affected the street, illuminating, darkening or making material reflective. Sometimes I focused on the shadow rather than the thing itself, looking obliquely, or at the effects of what I noticed. When, at various stages during the making process, I reflected upon the collection of photographs and started to sequence them, I could see how the repeated translation of the street into two-dimensional space was informing how I looked and what I saw on subsequent occasions. My daily walk became increasingly strange to me as the previous images changed what I attended to and how it appeared to me. The street became ever changing; the harder I looked, the more infinitely various it became, and the less possible it was to ever be able to represent it adequately. The street was nearer than ever in terms both of the quantity of photographs in which it was depicted and in the close-ups of specific sections,

yet it seemed simultaneously to always be pushed further away from me. This happened too in the image pairs as the formal qualities of the picture plane (light and shadow, shape and texture, framing of or within the image) also worked to defamiliarise each photograph, making the world tilt, slide and rear up, or reveal the formation of visual links and patterns. I sought to pursue this through textual practice, to approach the subject from yet another direction, using a mechanism where modest forms of narrative became more prevalent, and where emerged a more 'human' voice, as opposed to the formal, apparently dispassionate, photography. This written element could be thought of as another two-dimensional plane to that of the photographs, reflecting or refracting what can be seen in this specific location. Bringing together text and image in such a way sees them align at points, while elsewhere they jar, speaking of things in a different register. The effect is not to 'pin down' the place, but rather to keep response in motion, to produce still more un-definitive findings, and indeed to make me increasingly less certain.

For artistic research, this becoming less known is not the negative it might be in other disciplines, and can in fact be considered a state in which to linger. As Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum make clear in their preface to the edited collection *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, artists use strategies 'to "think" in ways that stray beyond the methods of other disciplines', and their research occupies 'a kind of liminal space where not knowing is not only not overcome, but sought, explored, and savoured'.²⁷ Indeed, as Rachel Jones, one of their contributors puts it, working 'without knowing where one is going or might end up is a necessary condition of creation', since what's needed is 'the generation of difference rather than the reproduction of the already known' and thus it might be said that the quest for knowledge 'understood as a desire to reduce the strange to the familiar' runs counter to this.²⁸

There is a sense here that this sort of artistic research practice is about keeping things strange and generating further possibility, rather than delivering conclusive findings, as might be the case in other disciplines. For Perec too, this exploratory, experimental movement is palpable: 'Even if what I produce seems to derive from a programme worked out a long time ago, from a long-standing project, I believe rather that I discover – that I prove – the direction I am moving in by moving'.²⁹ He goes on to say that his books are 'describing point by point the stages of a search, the 'why' of which I can't tell, only the 'how'.³⁰ While Perec talks of wanting to 'lay hold on our truth',³¹ his *practice* of attention to the most infra-ordinary aspects actually becomes a sort of continual mechanism for creating strangeness and pushing aside what is known at each stage;

as a result, definitive conclusions are delayed and responses are kept in motion.

By paying attention to mere surfaces, investigating slowly, closely and repetitively, and translating these encounters via the dimensions of photography and writing, it transpires that the infra-ordinary, the very stuff that ought to be so known to us – so familiar – turns out to be infinitely strange. Just a little flippantly, I find myself conceptualising this as a sort of quantum cultural studies, an exploration at a much smaller scale than that of the macroscopic world, and where as a result the ‘normal’ rules of research do not work ... However, more properly, I would propose this as a key mode of artistic research, suggesting that the specific methods of this field allow for or enable other types of results. I agree with artist and philosopher Jyrki Siukonen, who has argued that art offers a different form of knowing: ‘I find it difficult to be interested in works that tell us only those things we could learn from other sources – from historians, sociologists, psychologists, etc. If there is any point in discussing artistic knowledge, it is when it also tells us something different, something that could not be told in any other way.’³²

For the Formalists, what was important in the process of defamiliarisation was experiencing the artfulness of an object, the object itself being unimportant. This is not my position, since the specific subject matter is clearly crucial in my investigations, but the aesthetic effects and qualities of image-making and writing produced for and through artistic research are capable of generating responses that enrich or amplify the subject, telling us something different than would ever be possible with other approaches. Ultimately this making strange is about creating and sustaining a state of wonder where final judgement is suspended, and one is encouraged to remain open to alternative interpretations: for Rachel Jones, ‘Learning to see as strange makes us un-at-home in the everyday, and thereby restores it as a potential place of marvel, where we might become other than what or who we are.’³³ Experiencing the everyday in this way, through wonder, is critically transformative, since as a researcher it makes things less certain and it questions, too, the methods by which research might actually ‘lay hold on our truth’, offering instead a more durational prospect by which multiple realities and affects can sustain, held in complex relation.

Notes

1. Perec, ‘Species of Spaces’, 50.
2. Perec, ‘Approaches to What?’, *Species of Spaces*, 210.
3. Perec, ‘Species of Spaces’, 51.

4. Campany, 'Architecture as Photography', 28.
5. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 61.
6. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 54.
7. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 50.
8. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 61.
9. Perec, 'Approaches to What?', 210.
10. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 50.
11. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 51.
12. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 53–4.
13. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 61.
14. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 51, 52.
15. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 78.
16. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 53.
17. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 60.
18. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 53.
19. Perec, 'Approaches to What?', 210.
20. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 93–5.
21. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 35.
22. Perec, 'Approaches to What?', 210.
23. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 60.
24. Perec, 'Species of Spaces', 50.
25. For more on this, see the discussion of 'project' and 'essay' forms as methodological tools in relation to ideas of emergence through practice in Lee, 'On Not Staying Put', 11–26.
26. Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', 12.
27. Fisher and Rebecca, 'Preface', *On Not Knowing*, 7.
28. Jones, 'On the Value of Not Knowing', 16.
29. Perec, 'Notes on What I'm Looking For', 142.
30. Perec, 'Notes on What I'm Looking For', 143.
31. Perec, 'Approaches to What?', 211.
32. Siukonen, *On Artistic Knowledge*, 3.
33. Jones, 'On the Value of Not Knowing', 18.

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